

People, purpose – and power

Five pioneering councils have teamed up with Collaborate CIC to share insight, solve problems collectively and build their influence – all with a common goal: to work with people, not impose solutions on them. **Ellen Care** explains the role of councils as convenors of place, maximising impact in complex times

When no single organisation can see or control the whole system, it takes collaborative leadership, rather than command and control to support places to thrive. Many local authorities are stepping into this role and acting not only as service delivery organisations but also as ‘convenors of place’.

Over the last three months, social consultancy Collaborate CIC has brought together a group of councils working to do just that in our people, purpose, power learning community.

Leaders from Camden LBC, Doncaster Council, Sheffield City Council, Test Valley BC and Wigan MBC have been sharing insight, collectively problem-solving and building collective influence. The pioneer places Collaborate CIC is working with have been reflecting on the shared learning and thinking they have brought to the complex challenges of local government today.

Whether it is tackling health inequalities, supporting inclusive growth or increasing community cohesion, our learning community councils tell us that only by collaborating across organisations and with communities can we all achieve real impact.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill offers a particular opportunity for councils to step into and strengthen their role as convenors of place – putting communities at the centre of neighbourhood governance, embracing new powers and responsibilities and building the new operating model of local government through local government reorganisation.

Testing pooled public service budgets in local areas with councils will have an increasingly important enabling role to play in helping local partners work better together and embed prevention. This is not just a technical, financial and governance task, but one requiring shared purpose, strong relationships and a collaborative culture at all levels.

The role of convener is to support and enable collective work, rather than act unilaterally and paternalistically on behalf of the wider system. Not controlling and directing, but instead, enabling a collective conversation, listening and responding in different ways – sometimes leaning in, sometimes stepping back to make space for others and sometimes taking on a different role, like hosting and coordinating.

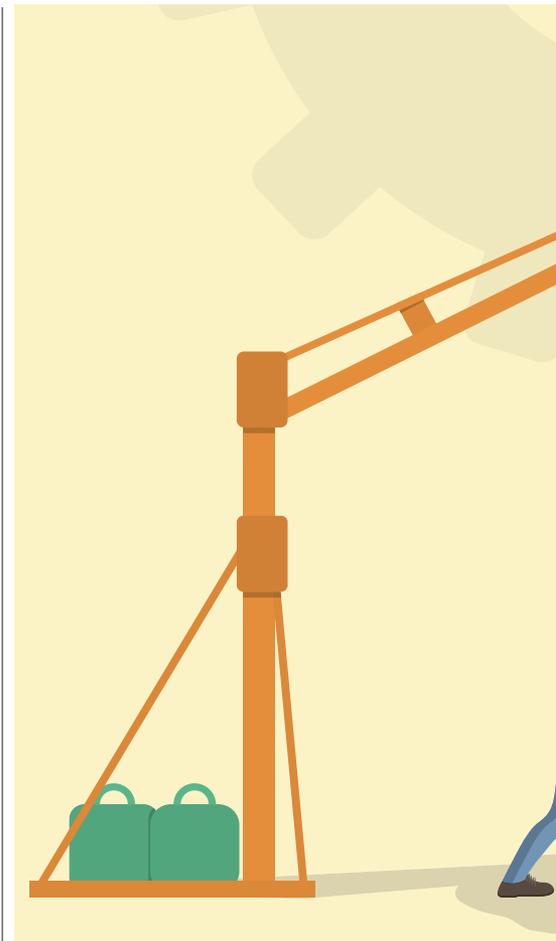
Creating the conditions to work with people rather than do to them. This means thinking differently about people, purpose and power.

For Test Valley BC, developing a person-centred approach and its convening role has gone hand-in-hand. It brings together a wide range of people across the borough to work together on their priority issues. From senior leaders to bin operatives to elected members, people working at all levels of the organisation have been on the journey to reimagine what they do to ‘work with’ people, rather than ‘deliver to’ them.

Real change in communities’ and partners’ experience of the council requires a deep focus on organisational development and the internal conditions needed to enable a different approach.

Fostering shared purpose is a key role for councils acting as convenors. Wigan’s two Progress with Unity missions set out collective ambitions for the whole borough, marking the council’s shift into a cross-system convening role focused on tackling complex systemic issues.

Doncaster’s Great 8 serves a similar purpose, with each priority having a community representative bringing their experience and connecting with others from the voluntary and community sector. With shared purpose, organisations can shift the focus from their own delivery to exploring their collective resources and strengths – and those of the community – to achieve shared outcomes.



Collective purpose needs infrastructure and a culture that supports collaboration. Traditional partnership boards are unlikely to do the job, so places are experimenting with new approaches such as Sheffield’s emerging Partnerships Lab.

Councils can contribute by modelling collaborative behaviours, internally and externally, both when it is easy and – most importantly – when it is hard.

Shifting to a convening role means having the will and ability to share power. Camden LBC sees this as requiring local authorities and their staff to be open to taking a deep look at themselves and to ‘hold their position lightly’. This can mean working transparently in the open, even on really tricky issues and being prepared



Sheffield city centre

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How Sheffield’s City Goals are the guide

Sheffield City Council is reshaping its role – not as a standalone authority, but as a convener of place, bringing partners together to drive shared outcomes. By championing alignment across the system and collective accountability, the council aims to secure good jobs, healthy lives, safe neighbourhoods and a strong sense of belonging for everyone in the city, write **Jonathan Clifton** and **Laura Reynolds**

Sheffield has developed 18 City Goals. They were created through thousands of conversations, drawing together diverse voices and perspectives. They describe the city we aspire to be in 2035.

They are not a detailed delivery plan, but rather a set of ‘north stars’ – helping to align ambition, energy and activity

at all levels of the city, to try and achieve them.

The goals bring together universities, the NHS, council, the combined authority, businesses, voluntary and community organisations and individual citizens around one simple vision: a fairer, greener, more prosperous Sheffield.

This requires our city’s ecosystem to change – moving beyond traditional governance, to empower and enable people and organisations.

This very different way of working challenges how we hold ourselves collectively accountable for what matters most to people – good jobs, healthy lives, safe neighbourhoods and a sense of belonging.

The council sees itself as part of a wider system making the City Goals a reality, acting as ‘convener of place’ to encourage alignment, not uniformity – leadership



to make more space for other voices.

In developing its new Progress with Unity strategy, Wigan Council explicitly worked to shift power. It created a new Community Connection Group, as part of an 18 month engagement process, enabling voluntary and community leaders to play a key role in developing priorities and collective ways of working that sit at the heart of the strategy.

Taking on a new role and navigating these shifts is challenging – especially as it often requires rethinking what good looks like and being increasingly comfortable with uncertainty. This is not something you do some of the time for specific priorities or plans, but a new way of being. And it takes investment in the time and space

necessary to develop trust.

The palpable energy in our learning community sessions suggest these challenges are well worth grappling with.

For the authorities stepping into this convening role, the rewards have been clear: enabling more innovative service solutions, stronger relationships and better meeting residents' ambitions and priorities, as well as enabling more empowered, motivated staff, who are developing new skills and feel more connected to real impact in the places they serve.

Being a convener can be a daunting task – it touches on all parts and functions of a local authority and requires personal as well as organisational change. There is no single blueprint

to follow. Every place will do things differently. But with practical insight from places already on the journey and the right tools, experience and support to build effective and sustainable collaborations, the opportunity is there for the taking.

The advice from our learning community is clear: start somewhere. Don't overthink the strategy, but do invest in relationships and be prepared to experiment, learn and adapt as you go. ▶

Ellen Care is head of practice at Collaborate CIC, a social consultancy pioneering collaborative thinking and practice to tackle complex challenges across the UK

Leading lights drawing people and partners together

through shared purpose, not control.

The complexity, diversity and inequality within our place shapes everything – from educational outcomes to community confidence. No single organisation ever sees the whole picture. Each of us holds a different view of the same system.

As convenors of place, we are there to focus energy where it matters, to test ideas together and to measure progress in ways that reflect real lives.

None of us can fix the system alone, but together we can understand it differently and as convenors of place, we offer stability to help the whole system move, with clear direction, not drift.

That is why leadership across institutions is essential. When our civic partners move with shared purpose – on housing,

skills, health and opportunity – we are not just delivering services, but reshaping the social fabric of a place. And as convenors, we begin to see how those pieces connect – how the work of one partner depends on the success of another.

Working in partnership is messy, imperfect, sometimes exhausting – and utterly necessary.

There is friction due to different accountabilities, funding cycles, timescales – even different languages. But friction is not failure. It is where ideas meet reality and where policy ambitions meet lived experience.

This sort of partnership work does not happen by accident. We have had to create new systems, or infrastructures, to support this place-making. We are developing ways to have neighbourhood conversations; to measure progress against the goals with metrics that matter; to empower the

next generation; to develop new financing solutions and to train leaders across different levels of the system. All this is stewarded by a Sheffield Stronger Together Leadership Group that focuses on being out in communities, building relationships, listening and setting direction.

Our institutions don't have to move in perfect alignment, we just have to keep moving together, grounded in shared purpose and mutual trust.

That is the hard work of place-making and the most valuable kind of leadership we can offer.

Jonathan Clifton is director of strategy and communications and Laura Reynolds is business change manager in strategy and communications – both at Sheffield City Council